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Earthly indifference and human difference - Book review

Abstract

Inspired by, but also in reaction to the flattened topologies of Latourian relationality, Clark puts forward the notion of radical asymmetry. 'This is the bottom line of human being: we are utterly dependent on an earth and a cosmos that is, to a large degree, indifferent to us' (p. 50). With their disciplinary connection to the physical and natural sciences, geographers arguably need this lesson less than other social scientists. We should have learned it well from geologists who, spending their working lives in deepest time, tend to have a less anthropocentric perspective than others (perhaps accounting for their disproportionate representation among scientists sceptical of anthropogenic climate change). Further, if we accept the tenets of evolutionary ecology, it is a total accident that we are here anyway, and we won't be for long, either as individuals or as a species. Just as the quietly joyful practice of everyday life flies in the face of certain death, all politics is optimism in the face of extinction.

Keywords

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Earthly indifference and human difference

Lesley Head

Inspired by, but also in reaction to the flattened topologies of Latourian relationality, Clark puts forward the notion of radical asymmetry. 'This is the bottom line of human being: we are utterly dependent on an earth and a cosmos that is, to a large degree, indifferent to us' (p. 50). With their disciplinary connection to the physical and natural sciences, geographers arguably need this lesson less than other social scientists. We should have learned it well from geologists who, spending their working lives in deepest time, tend to have a less anthropocentric perspective than others (perhaps accounting for their disproportionate representation among scientists sceptical of anthropogenic climate change). Further, if we accept the tenets of evolutionary ecology, it is a total accident that we are here anyway, and we won't be for long, either as individuals or as a species. Just as the quietly joyful practice of everyday life flies in the face of certain death, all politics is optimism in the face of extinction.

But Clark challenges us further:

'What is at stake here is the core premise of critical, radical or progressive social thought: the belief that the realities we inhabit can and should be changed.' (50).

'Paradoxically, then, the outcome of affording more agency to nonhumans has been a massive expansion of the dominions of being upon which collective human agency imagines it has purchase.' (51)

'My intention in facing up to forces that exceed our measure or reach is not to disavow social agency, but to get it into perspective – with an ultimate aim of helping to understand when and where strategic human interventions are most effective.' (107)

Radical asymmetry puts 'limits on what is open to being re-enacted or done differently' (57), and challenges the modern distinction between 'is' and 'ought' (89), since 'mastery is out of the question' (175).

Via examples such as earthquakes, tsunamis and climate change, Clark uses *the loss of a stable ground* as shorthand for the impact of physical upheavals (163). He means it conceptually too, taking the 1755 Lisbon earthquake as the event which evacuated God, or guiding principles, from ground zero (90) for the modern human subject. (See Low 2012 for a poignant evocation of destabilisation in the later Christchurch earthquakes in Clark's native New Zealand.)

Here I engage with three aspects. First, Clark's emphasis on disasters sets up a particular structure of relationship between humans and the earth. (It may also and paradoxically further separate humans and the earth at the same time as he seems to want to generate a more earthly – literally, grounded -- ontology.) Yet not all nonhuman is the same, and not all of its indifference has the same sort of implications for us, humans. It is important to decouple earthly indifference from the specifics of different agential processes. Consider how this argument might be reframed if Clark had drawn his examples from evolutionary ecology rather than the earth and atmospheric sciences, i.e. if God had

evacuated the modernist ground zero not in the Lisbon earthquake, but with Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Taking a biotic perspective, concepts of contingency, threshold, surprise and instability are just as prominent in the scientific literature, but the implications of planetary indifference are not necessarily catastrophic for humans. Some of the indifference is in fact convivial, providing food and shelter, and some of it is now co-dependent, while still exerting power over human affairs, as in the case of staple domesticated crops.

An indifferent earth is one thing, but it is not this indifference itself which shakes our stable ground. The lithosphere, the biosphere, the atmosphere (and their components) are differently amenable to human power. Geographers in particular need to keep asking when, where and how does human difference and commonality with the rest of the earth matter?

Along this vein, the chapter on fire works least well for Clark's argument of radical asymmetry. Even on the necessarily selective evidence he presents, the human-fire-vegetation assemblage is surely one of the best possible applications of Latourian relationality that we could think of. Under different conditions the relations that constitute this assemblage are more or less symmetrical – a question for empirical elaboration rather than ontology. This is not to say that the agency always emerges evenly, as the 2009 Victorian bushfires showed. But fire is very different to, say, tsunami. People cannot always control fire, but as Clark's extensive quoting of Aboriginal examples shows, they can sometimes.

My second and connected point is a historical one; putting the human in to the story has been hard won in the geological and palaeoecological enterprise. The Anthropocene may indeed be 'a massive expansion of the dominions of being upon which collective human agency imagines it has purchase', but it is not built on imagination alone; rather it emerged out of more than half a century of research. And resistance to that message has gone in parallel. To take just one example, the role of Aboriginal people in the co-production of the Australian fire assemblage can still be marketed as a radical new theory (Gammage, 2011), more than forty years after the seminal scientific paper (Jones, 1969) and hundreds of others on the topic. Tsunami and earthquakes are one thing, but now is not the time to downplay human agency in many other earthly challenges, particularly those related to land use change and the maintenance of biodiversity.

Third, then, what are we to do? How can we meet Clark's entirely laudable objective of understanding when and where strategic human interventions are most effective, in a world of unpredictability, tipping points, rapid change and the magnification of threshold effects? He takes issue with the left liberal critique of the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami response, in its concern with structural issues of social justice, which 'shut down any insinuation that the Tsunami itself was a 'natural' disaster' (63). While it might have been nice for scholars to first express love and existential empathy (and presumably many did respond with personal generosity) in the face of the disaster, surely attending to the structural issues is precisely the only aspect of the hazard that we can do something about? With respect to the (post-book) Japanese tsunami, what would Clark have the geographer say other than, perhaps we should not put nuclear power plants on tsunami-facing coasts?

For me, Clark's provocative discussions of asymmetric justice, in a context where the rules of causation are changing, are the most innovative and confronting aspects of his argument. How must concepts of justice based on restoring balance and fairness be reworked in a world of surprise,

unfairness and the loss of the stable ground that climate change will deliver us? Just as environmental thought has had to let go of the idea of returning to a stable baseline, so social thought must rework itself for a world we may not recognise. He doesn't say that we should give up on climate change mitigation, but that is one implication. What sort of cosmopolitics will enable us to deal 'constructively and compassionately with arrangements *we cannot do otherwise*' (213)? Should we blow it all in a modern day potlatch, extending hospitality to strangers via the 'mass, unilateral dissipation of industrial riches' (133)? These conversations are only begun in the book, but their continuation may be its most important legacy.

Gammage, B. 2011: *The Biggest Estate on Earth. How Aborigines made Australia*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Jones, R. 1969: Fire-stick farming. *Australian Natural History* 16, 224-231.

Low, N. 2012: Ear to the ground. *Griffith Review* 35. (<http://griffithreview.com/edition-35-surviving/>).